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# XIV*—ON WISHING THERE WERE UNICORNS

by Stephen R. L. Clark

First year undergraduates, in most British universities, are taught to say that existence is not a predicate, that Meinong believed in the real being of non-existent objects like the golden mountain (of which one truly says that it *is*: a mountain, but *is not*: *simpliciter*), and that Russell cured this minor 'disease of language' by analysing 'tigers exist, but not unicorns' as 'something or other is a tiger, but nothing at all is a unicorn'. As Moore insisted, whereas we can meaningfully say that most tigers growl, it makes no sense to say that most or many or rather few of them exist.[1] That there could be real things (like Shere Khan, or the One that Came to Tea) that yet do not exist is a fantasy, to be eliminated by more careful speech. This analysis is presumed to be morally and metaphysically neutral. It is my contention that it is not, and that we have no real reason to adopt it. Plenty of real things don't exist (not even in ordinarily possible worlds), and the existence of such things as modernist philosophers take so seriously is not so easily distinguishible from fantasy. Our students are being cheated of a possibility as surely as were (and are) the victims of such 'English text-books' as Lewis pilloried forty years ago.[2]

Those same undergraduates will probably be instructed, just a little later, that we cannot intelligibly question whether there are really human beings, external bodies, or our very selves because such terms are learnt through their use. That we can speak of such things at all confirms their being. So unicorns can only 'not exist' if there was never any occasion to call something a unicorn: if there was then they must have existed (must, timelessly, exist) even if we now call them rhinoceroses or ibexes. For unicorns to exist, something must 'be a unicorn': but 'being a unicorn' is just being called 'unicorn', and how else could the

* Meeting of the Aristotelian Society held at 5/7 Tavistock Place, London WC1, on Monday, 18 June, 1990 at 6.00 p.m.

[1] G. E. Moore, 'Is Existence a Predicate?', in A. Flew ed., *Logic and Language*, 2nd series (Blackwell: Oxford 1961).

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (Bles: London 1944).

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word have meaning than by ostension? By the same token there were once witches (which is to say, people were called 'witches'), dephlogisticated air and Olympian gods.

So perhaps the standard response to Anselm (that reality is one thing and our words another) sits less easily than one might think with the standard response to Meinong (or Meinong misinterpreted). If the non-existence of unicorns must be interpreted as there being nothing *called* a unicorn, the existence of fishes as there being things *called* fishes, then the limits of our language are the limits of our world—and what we cannot avoid mentioning is bound to exist. We can after all conclude that those who deny God must deny language: for God to exist it is necessary that something be called God, and the sense of 'God' is given by what is usually or historically called 'God'. Either nothing is called 'God' (no-one has ever called anything 'God'), and there is no more sense in denying God's existence than the Dshy's (the *what*?), or else it means something to speak of God, something is called 'God', and God, ineluctably, exists. To deny God is like trying to say one is a vat-brain: either 'vat-brain' means the sort of thing that we call 'vat-brains' (and we aren't those) or it means nothing that we could ever name (and claiming to be one is to utter nonsense).[3]

But surely this is fallacious? There were indeed, and are, people called 'witches', but it does not follow that there were or are people with the properties thereby attributed to them, of ill-wishing their neighbours' cows, contracting with the Devil and flying invisibly to their festival while simulacra of their bodies drowsed at home. When we deny that Lady Catherine de Bourgh ever existed 'we are not, properly speaking, saying of *Lady Catherine de Bourgh* [my italics] that she never existed . . . Rather, we are saying of "Lady Catherine de Bourgh" that no-one ever was both called by that name and truly describable by certain descriptions to be found in *Pride and Prejudice*'.[4] Something was called 'dephlogisticated air', but yet we can truly deny that there ever was such a thing as was supposed. 'Talk about characters listed in the Classical Dictionary is talk

[3] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1981), pp. 8 f.

[4] C. J. F. Williams, *What is Existence?* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1981), p. 260.

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about the expressions that constitute that list'.[5] That some, but not all, of those characters exist 'really means' that some, not all, of the expressions are 'genuine proper names'. Nothing is really God-like, and there are no unicorns, no creatures with the properties of would-be unicorns.

> The Dshy's a beast of midnight gloom,
> which fills one hour and one room,
> and all the time it is aware,
> that maybe it may not be there.[6]

And maybe, by the same token, there is nothing now that has the properties of being human, bodily or sentient however many things there are that 'we call by these names'. And maybe we are truly what we falsely suppose others, wholly wrapt up in dreams.[7]

Either we answer Anselm by insisting that the world of discourse and the real world have no necessary match (and we must acknowledge the possibility of radical doubt), or else we avoid such doubts at the price of conceding that our language does dictate what is, and Anselm has an easy victory. We could evade Anselm on this latter view only by not speaking of God: once one does, His reality follows (though we may still not be quite clear what properties the thing called 'God' would have).

> Don't think about the Dshy at all
> lest it or worse may you befall.
> Remember, that the Dshy is not,
> and that the beast be best forgot.

So what is it that we wish there was, or are afraid there might be? We wish, let us suppose, that there were unicorns: is it that we wish that something was a unicorn, that something merited the title 'unicorn'? 'Regretfully I must conclude that nothing of all the things that are deserve that title, but I wish one or other of them did.' Meinong pointed out that this was not true to our

[5] Williams, op. cit., p. 266, contra P. F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment* (Methuen: London 1965), p. 195.

[6] Hans Hess, 'The Dshy': *Yet More Comic and Curious Verse*, selected by J. M. Cohen (Penguin: Harmondsworth 1959), p. 87 (first published in *Punch*).

[7] See my 'Waking-up: a neglected model for Immortality', in *Inquiry* 26. 1983, pp. 209–30.

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intention: I do not wish that one of the things there are were a unicorn instead of whatever it is, but that there be something else, namely at least one unicorn in addition to presently existing things. When a childless woman wishes for a child 'she is directing her mind to something which lies beyond the actual world and which will possibly always lie beyond it'.[8] 'The unicorn lived in a lilac wood, and she lived all alone':[9] would that she did. A white mare transmogrified is not enough (why not leave the mare perfect as she is?). But if what I want is that there be something, namely a unicorn, as well as all the mundane furniture of the world, how can I express my wish except by wishing that unicorns were real? Why should I agree that all I really wanted was that the expression 'unicorn' had some referential use? I want there to be something else than there already is, some thing else *to exist* than does.

The problem is still worse. Suppose there were unicorns, in the same sense as there are mares: a wilder breed of *eohippus* or its kin. Would that satisfy desire? My problem is not Kripke's, that there are no criteria to distinguish unicorns from 'fools' unicorns',[10] and hence no clearly distinguishable possible world where truly there are unicorns. That problem, once we have escaped the trap set by merely ostensive, causal understandings of the words we use, can surely be solved by specifying quite exactly what it is to be a unicorn, to deserve the title. 'Pliny decribes the unicorn as being very ferocious, similar in the rest of its body to a horse, with the head of a deer, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a bear; a deep, bellowing voice, and a single black horn, two cubits in length. And the Chinese . . .'.[11] The trouble is that if there were such a thing, it would be only one more natural species. Just so the final identification of the Loch Ness Monster would be a brief excitement (before it became a thing to gawp at in the local marina). 'In whatever world [the dragon has] his being it [is] an *Other-world* [my italics] . . . The world that contain[s] even the imagination of Fafnir [is] richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril'—even if we don't

[8] J. N. Findlay, *Meinong's Theory of Objects* (Oxford University Press: London 1933), pp. 53 f.

[9] Peter Beagle, *The Last Unicorn* (Bodley Head: London, 1968), p. 3.

[10] S. Kripke. *Naming and Necessity* (Blackwell: Oxford 1980), pp. 157 ff.

[11] Beagle, op. cit., p. 5.

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want dragons loose in England now.[12] Nothing of the things that now exist, even if it were called 'dragon' and breathed fire, would be what we desire, nor what we fear. Thus Paul Veyne, fearing the Other-world, comments that, being afraid of ghosts, he wishes they *were* real, since then he could cope with them.[13] But if they were, they wouldn't be *ghosts*.

> Beware the beasts which don't exist,
> they grab you nightly by the wrist.
> Those horrors, like the awful Dshy
> which can not live and can not die.

Tolkien did not want to 'cope', but to create.

The options I have considered are as follows.

A. 'Unicorns exist' means just the same as 'some things are called "unicorns" '. But if nothing were called 'a unicorn', how could we know what was being denied? Nothing is called (apart from comic verse) 'a dshy': so what could it mean to say that the dshy does not exist?

B. 'Unicorns exist' means just the same as 'some things are called "unicorns", and have all or most of the properties commonly associated with that term' (Russell's preferred solution to the problem posed in A). So to wish for unicorns is to wish that something (as it might be, a presently existing mare) had that name and nature. But I neither wish the transformation of any presently existing thing, nor relish the emergence of a natural species with all or most of those imagined properties.

C. The real being of unicorns, or Lady Catherine, rests in their very non-existence, their not being tangible or countable things 'out there in the world'.[14] But what exactly is thus countable or tangible?

It is the non-existent that we wish were real, but real, if that were possible, in its very non-existence. We want an addition to the realm of existents, but fear that if there were such an

[12] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy-Stories': Tree and Leaf (Allen & Unwin: London 1961), p. 40. See also B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (Thames & Hudson: London 1976), p. 64: 'after the age of approximately five—the age when fairy tales become truly meaningful—no normal child takes these stories as true to external reality'.

[13] Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks believe in their Myths?* (Chicago University Press: Chicago 1989), pp. 78 f.

[14] Colin Falck reaches similar conclusions in 'Fictions and Reality': *Philosophy* 63. 1988, pp. 363–71.

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addition it would only enlarge the list of things that do exist. A really existing ghost would only be an extra pest, and not a ghost at all. An existent unicorn would be another beast in natural history books. If there really was (somewhere) a person called 'Lady Catherine', truly describable by Austen's words, would *that* have been whom she was describing? Surely not: 'all the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental'. If there were such a being, she would undoubtedly be more (and less) than Austen said. She could, after all, read Austen and repent. Blake's comment on Chaucer's Pilgrims: 'they are the physiognomies or lineaments of universal human life . . . visions of the eternal attributes, or divine names'.[15] Chesterton reached a similar conclusion about Dickens' characters, thereby enabling me, at least, to read Dickens patiently. Great story-tellers are not gossip columnists, even of a strangely metaphysical kind.

A similar effect is produced by talk of possible worlds. If we interpret fictional discourse as specifying some or other possible world,[16] then the possibility of something's happening that actually (in *this* world) didn't has to be taken to be the actuality of that thing's happening in a distinctively different world.

> A sentence uttered makes a world appear.
> where all things happen as it says they do.[17]

If there are many possible worlds, then such worlds exist as alongside, parallel universes, and their inhabitants are as distinct from us as we from the (actual) inhabitants of Timbuctoo. So the Stephen who went to live in Japan (as I might have done) is not to be identified with me (from which it follows that actually I could not have done anything but what I did, however many counterparts of mine did otherwise). What is actual is other: but the whole point of postulating possible worlds was to capture the sense that things—these same things—really might be, or have been, otherwise.

Such real, other worlds as might be visited by trans-dimensional explorers (a possibility that identifies twice as many

[15] W. Blake, 'Descriptive Catalogue': *Complete Writings*, ed. G. Keynes (Oxford University Press: London 1966), pp. 569, 571.

[16] As David Lewis, 'Truth in Fiction': *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15. 1978, 37 ff.

[17] W. H. Auden, *Collected Shorter Poems 1927–57* (Faber: London 1966), p. 320.

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possible worlds as previously: the possible worlds metaphysically isolated from each other, and their mirror-images, between which travel *is* possible)[18] lack something. If novelists are only documenting some other universe, could they get it wrong? 'It is false that the Sleeping Beauty died before the Prince reached her':[19] but can we be sure that a story with this dénouement is about the Sleeping Beauty that didn't die? Must it not really be about the one that did (and so be, tautologically, true)? 'If anyone were truly to be described like that, she would have died before the Prince's kiss; if she didn't, then that's not who I meant.' If Greek tragedians can vary the folk-tale, so that Homer's Oedipus and Sophocles', Aeschylus' Orestes and Euripides' are different people doing different things, what single thing can it be that 'Orestes' names? There are as many Oresteis, obviously, as writers, directors, actors, audience create or sense. So wishing that the Unicorn existed, or the Sleeping Beauty, or (improbably) Orestes is not just wishing that something be, quite plausibly, called by those names. Not every dramatic realization is true to the real being even if we had never before thought to think that Orestes or the Unicorn was not 'like that'.

It seems at first sight obvious that fictional discourse is parasitic. How could we understand what actors do on stage, or story-tellers tell us, if we did not already know how to use such words in common life? An actor saying 'I take thee as my lawful wedded wife' *pretends* to marry because there are those who, saying the same words, really do take wives. The story-teller who begins his tale, 'the unicorn lived in a lilac wood . . .', is only not uttering gibberish because we know when to say truly of some things or other that they live in a lilac wood, and know how truly to predicate such terms (as 'having one horn', 'being cloven-hooved', 'being the colour of snow falling on a moonlit night') of real things. Even Thurber's todal (that 'makes a sound like rabbits screaming, and smells of old, unopened rooms')[20] can only appear in story because we vaguely understand the

[18] Consider Roger Zelazny's *Amber* series, beginning with *Nine Princes in Amber* (Doubleday: New York 1970) and heading steadily downhill ever since.

[19] Williams, op. cit., p. 246.

[20] J. Thurber, *The Thirteen Clocks* (Penguin: Harmondsworth 1962, 1st published 1951), p. 38.

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description, and add further details from our own experience of fear. These truths at least are evident.

Derrida's attack on Austin,[21] for thus downgrading fiction, is not such as to convince most British philosophers: where it is clear, it is usually fallacious; where it is perhaps not fallacious, this is only because it is too obscure to tell. But there is a serious question here, however badly handled by someone reacting (one may charitably suppose) against the kind of false philosophy as propounds absolute 'truths' in contempt of popular or unprofessional 'make-believe'. Do we first (or did humankind first) learn to speak of present realities and only then indulge in make-believe? Did we invent the wheel before we invented the wheel of fate, or the high heavens? Is truth what's unconcealed, and 'existence' just another word for present being? 'Existent tigers' is a pleonasm, 'non-existent todals' or 'the Dshy' a trivial self-contradiction, easily eliminated in a purer language (where we speak instead of Thurber's use of words to mock and terrify).

But consider the usual argument against claims that honey-bees have language, even if they can perform dances which, effectively, convey information, and which do so by their symbolic relationship to extra-linguistic realities. Can the bees dance 'falsely', or 'pretend'? If they cannot (and it is generally assumed that this is so, though without anything but a bare prejudice to ground the assumption), then they cannot intend truth either.[22] Only those intend truth, and to be understood, who know what it is to miss, to be misunderstood, to feign. The human invention of true-speaking is parasitic on the possibility of lies, fictions, airy nothings. Better still: 'the incarnate mind, the tongue and the tale are in our world coeval'.[23]

The couple who get married utter words in their 'first context', marry in the act of saying 'I marry you', and actors only feign the ritual. That it is a ritual at all, of course, at once generates any number of ways in which the ceremony fails. Derrida appears to confuse this truism with the much more striking claim that pretence is not parasitic on performance. Actors don't do just what counterfeiters do even if some

[21] J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. A. Bass (Harvester: Brighton 1982), 321 ff.
[22] J. Bennett, *Rationality* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London 1964), pp. 8 ff.
[23] J. R. R. Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories': *Tree and Leaf* (Allen & Unwin: London 1964), p. 25.

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moralists have suspected such. There is a difference between deceit and 'make-believe' (if that is the right title for imaginative play). But though there is a difference, and one carefully taught to our children, it is perhaps not altogether natural. To say anything at all is to deny something; to mean anything one must know what would make one's meaning false; to perform a ritual requires that there be ways of seeming to have performed, without success; one can only be an agent, or perform an act, if one could also be a hypocrite. The marrying couple act out a drama, do as the gods do in the familiar story, and by enacting it invoke those gods. Imagine a society where actors must leave out selected bits of ritual lest they end up being 'really married'; imagine a society where actors must not dress to look just like the policemen or clergymen they represent lest that be classed 'impersonation'. Maybe there is a point in Derrida's confusion: we cannot have the 'normal', 'serious' statements till we have the fictional or dramatic ones. To speak or act is to enact a drama. 'Literalness is a quality which some words have achieved in the course of their history; it is not a quality with which words were first born'.[24] First we made up a story; then we came to live in it.

What is going on when we say 'I promise'? By uttering the words, appropriately, I lay an obligation on myself *by saying that there is such an obligation.* I make it 'as good as true' by pretending that it is. Just so, children *dare* each other: 'you're a sissy if you don't do such-and-such'. Or Irish heroes lay *gessa* on each other, making it the case that they must perform the deed (or perish).[25] Moral obligation in general has a similar form, a 'pretence', so to call it, that some things are not possible: 'that's out of the question; no gentleman could do that; you can't mean that'. On Oxford station, years ago, there was a gap in the perimeter fence, making it possible to leave the station without presenting a ticket: the administration had solved their crisis very simply, by erecting a sign that said 'No Exit'. In brief: moral (and epistemological) discourse is parasitic upon fiction.

Is it obvious that there are really middle-sized, spatio-temporally continuous objects, bound in causal networks and available to objectifying experiment? Is it obvious that such

[24] O. Barfield, in L. C. Knights & B. Cottle, eds., *Metaphor and Symbol* (1960), p. 55.
[25] See my *Civil Peace and Sacred Order* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1989), pp. 77 f.

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objects can be unequivocally classified and judged as good or bad examples of their type? Is it obvious that we can synchronize events, acknowledge our past actions and commit our future? Is it obvious that we can distinguish 'dream' and 'waking life' (ignoring day-dream, fugue and messages from the unknown)? Is it obvious that someone who restrained herself within those 'truths' would see things clearly? 'Commonsense assumptions may be a species of fictitious beliefs held in place by our need to imagine a shared world of meaning and experience'.[26] After all, when did any of us have actual, unbroken experience of any of those middle-sized objects (even our own bodies)? We automatically fill in the gaps between this sighting and the next, despite having all the 'evidence' we reasonably could that material objects are discontinuous. In Borges' *Tlon* the idea that one might 'find' what yesterday one 'lost' is verbal fallacy: a coin lost yesterday may be counted the equal of that found today, but is no more identical than yesterday's pain with today's.[27] The would-be natural kinds of which we are so sure, such as lecture-rooms and chairs, trees and weeds and creepy-crawly things, are as fictitious as chimeras, or the todal.[28] Our own self-identities, on several modern philosophers' word, are made up, no more or less 'objective' than the identity of nations over time. We teach our children to believe in identities that transcend the present moment when they *want* a toy: 'think of it as yourself that gets the toy tomorrow or next year'. Those same toys are not mere imitations of an earlier reality: they are the mode under which what comes to seem reality is known. 'I remember a Battersea little girl who wheeled her large baby sister stuffed into a doll's perambulator. When questioned on this course of conduct, she replied "I haven't got a dolly, and Baby is pretending to be my dolly"'.[29] Scepticism about a future life, or the reality of unicorns, is dull: 'The exciting question for real scepticism is whether we possess a past life. What is a minute ago, rationalistically considered, except a tradition and a picture?'.[30]

[26] C. Norris, *Contest of Faculties* (Methuen: London 1985) p. 100.

[27] J. L. Borges, *Labyrinths*, eds. D. A. Yates & J. E. Irby (Penguin: Harmondsworth 1970), p. 36.

[28] See my 'Is Humanity a Natural Kind?' in Tim Ingold, ed., *What is an Animal?* (Unwin Hyman: London 1989), pp.17–34.

[29] G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (Methuen: London 1909), p. 147.

[30] G. K. Chesterton, op. cit., p. 26.

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Who are we to say that a world of dragons, spirits and engaging wizards is more 'made-up' than our 'folk-universe', or than the careful constructs of the 'world of science'? 'The notion of human being as centered in the moral person of free will is also a mythical fantasy, an archetypal perspective given by a single Hero or a single God'.[31] Maybe we ourselves, no less than Lady Catherine, are characters in a novel? 'We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed . . . Mythology is the heart of things'.[32] The really important supplementary is: whose is the story? Ours? No-one's? Nobodaddy's? God's? Saga, tragedy or farce?

There is a variety of realism, or self-styled realism, that deserves rebuke. Those who insist on being 'realists', in politics or art, usually have a very constrained view of what is real. 'The notion that motor-cars are more "alive" than, say, centaurs or dragons is curious; that they are more "real" than, say, horses is pathetically absurd. How real, how startlingly alive is a factory chimney compared with an elm tree: poor obsolete thing, insubstantial dream of an escapist!'.[33] As Tolkien went on to say, much that self-styled realists call 'serious literature' is 'no more than play under a glass roof by the side of a municipal swimming-bath. Fairy-stories may invent monsters that fly the air or dwell in the deep, but at least they do not try to escape from heaven or the sea'.[34] Or in Chesterton's words: 'folk-lore means that the soul is sane, but that the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull and full of routine, but that the soul is sick and screaming'.[35]

But perhaps there is a scientific realism that escapes the dreary boundaries of our usual self-concern and 'faces the facts' without moral or metaphysical pretence? We live within a vast fiction, a story told by generations of the self-opinionated: in that fiction, bits of paper or base metal stand for all that we

[31] J. Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (Harper & Row: New York 1975), p. 178.
[32] A. MacIntyre, *Against Virtue* (Duckworth: London 1981), p. 201.
[33] Tolkien, op. cit., p. 55.
[34] Tolkien, op. cit., p. 56.
[35] G. K. Chesterton, op. cit., p. 97 f.

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could buy and sell, piles of glass and concrete earn the title 'house' or 'city hall', time is measured out with coffee spoons and what is right depends on where you are standing. We live in what Aurelius long-ago identified as 'a dream and a delirium',[36] surrounded by *Zeug*, implements, things typed as good or bad for purposes we hardly know we have. 'Ordinary life' is no less fictional than fairy-stories are, and it is naive to think that 'some things are tigers' is more literal, less literary, than 'some (non-existent) things are unicorns'. But 'science' is the millennial attempt to see things clearly, and to see them whole, cleansing our vision of all projective fantasy. It is a hard thing to abandon human nature, but we can at least attempt not to sentimentalize reality and to see things living in their 'sunny selfishness and virile indifference'.[37] 'I am sometimes afraid of finding there is a moral for everything . . . It would be a kind of Hell, surely, a world in which everything could be at once explained, shown to be obvious and useful . . . So gazing up on hot summer nights at the London stars, I cool my thoughts with a vision of the giddy, infinite, meaningless waste of Creation, the blazing Suns, the Planets and frozen Moons, all crashing blindly for ever across the void of space'.[38]

This is yet another literary trope. The merely 'objective universe' is as fictional a world as any, a way of emptying the world of its once-given significance in order to possess it more perfectly. The trees that once housed dryads are now ripe for felling; the lands that embodied stories are to be remade; living animals are but 'matter in motion', and even human flesh has lost its sacredness.[39] The unfortunate heroes of one of Stapledon's

[36] Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2.17.1.

[37] G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Fontana: London & Glasgow 1961; 1st published 1908), p. 20.

[38] L. Pearsall-Smith, *All Trivia* (Constable & Co: London 1933; 1st volume first published in 1918), p. 44. Pearsall-Smith spoke rather more mockingly of (probably) Bertrand Russell's 'free man's worship' in 1922: 'By Jove, that is a stunt! I cried' (op. cit., p. 81).

[39] 'Don't you see that dreadful dry light shed on things must at last wither up the moral mysteries as illusions, respect for age, respect for property, and that the sanctity of life will be a superstition? The men in the street are only organisms, with their organs more or less displayed. For such a one there is no longer any terror in the touch of human flesh, nor does he see God watching him out of the eyes of a man': G. K. Chesterton, *The Poet and the Lunatics* (Darwen Finlayson Ltd: London 1962; 1st published 1929), p. 70. Even of a fish it is blasphemous to say that it is *only* a fish (op. cit., p. 58).

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darker romances discover that reality is indeed wholly alien to the values of the awakened human spirit, that our life is played out round the feet of titans in an unending snow.[40] 'It is the strength of the northern mythological imagination that it faced this problem, put the monsters in the centre, gave them victory but no honour, and found a potent but terrible solution in naked will and courage'.[41] Such heroes at least promise a less ignoble goal than do those who surrender to the indifference they imagine—but blind heroism and indifferentism end in the same place. Those who come after may find it difficult to decide whether it was the Will to Power or the Indifferent Void that lay at the heart of National Socialism.

It is a curious feature of modernist prejudice that the very same people who insist that values cannot be grounded in mere facts, that the discoveries of an objective science are value- and metaphysic-neutral, regularly draw moral and metaphysical conclusions from their science. Can we at least imagine the science without the scientism? Scientific theory is our best bet yet for an account of how things work, what entities need to be mentioned in it, what properties are causally relevant, what truths are 'truths by nature' and not merely 'by convention'. But Borges' fictional warning has some strength to it. 'It is useless to answer [those entranced by consciously fictional orders like dialectical materialism, anti-semitism, nazism] that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws—I [Borges, that is] translate: inhuman laws—which we never quite grasp'.[42] A theory of the world that we could grasp would be a product of the human mind: what is there then to choose between 'psychotic' orders and 'scientific' ones? The same minds that sought out order through the scientific study of language were strangely susceptible to seduction by mediums speaking ersatz Martian and the like.[43] 'Enchanted by its rigour, humanity forgets over and over again that it is a rigour of chess masters, not of angels'.[44]

[40] O. Stapledon, *Darkness and the Light* (Methuen: London 1942).

[41] J. R. R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: the monsters and the critics* (Oxford University Press: London 1958, reprinted from *Proceedings of the British Academy* 22. 1936), p. 26.

[42] Borges, op. cit., p. 42.

[43] J. J. Lecercle, *Philosophy through the Looking-Glass* (Hutchinson: London 1985).

[44] Borges, op. cit., p. 42.

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Or else it is true after all that there is a method, call it scientific method, which tracks the mind of God, that 'divine law' is not inhuman law. That, after all, was the conviction of the founders of our science, inherited from a particular theory of the human mind, that the One Mind illuminated it, that our minds, at their best, were One.

'Probably every writer making a secondary world, a fantasy, every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality: hopes that the peculiar quality of this secondary world (if not all the details—for all the details may not be "true": it is seldom that the "inspiration" is so strong and lasting that it leavens all the lump, and does not leave much that is mere uninspired "invention") are derived from Reality, or are flowing into it'.[45] Tolkien later expressed the conviction that the stories he told 'arose in [his] mind as "given" things, and as they came, separately, so too the links grew . . . Always I had the sense of recording what was already "there", somewhere: not of "inventing" '.[46] The same conviction, and hope, lies within the ordinarily scientific endeavour. Stories begin to link together, ideas coined for one purpose suddenly serve another, unexpected patterns emerge until—if the author or investigator is lucky and hard-working—the whole vision is complete, that 'picture of the world which was born at his birth . . . that which he does not invent but rather discovers within himself'.[47] The question remains, of course, whether that picture is an epiphany, or an illusion. Science seems to be (or at least we hope it is) convergent towards some ultimate consensus: is story too?

> There is one story and one story only
> that will prove worth your telling,
> whether as learned bard or gifted child[48]

[45] Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories': op. cit., p. 61 f. See also G. K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Hodder & Stoughton: London 1925), p. 120 f: 'every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil'.

[46] Tolkien, cited by H. Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien* (Allen & Unwin: London 1977), p. 92.

[47] O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, tr. C. F. Atkinson (Knopf: New York 1926–8), I, p. xiii.

[48] Robert Graves, 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice': *Selected Poems* (Penguin: Harmondsworth 1966), p. 140.

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—but perhaps Graves got it wrong.

So what sort of being can less magical beasts have, and what is it we wish for? Tables and chairs and trees and weeds take their being from our human inventiveness, the story we spin, like spiders, 'from our own inwards [as our] own airy Citadel': 'the points of leaves and twigs on which the Spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting: man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean'.[49] Whatever is eventually to be decided about the veracity of scientific or mystical method (and I am myself a faithful realist *of sorts*), it is true that our lived worlds are fictional. It is not that we first see horses and then invent unicorns: the things we see are *horses* from the same stable as the unicorn. Our children do not learn to speak of 'bears' by encountering them: they learn of bears by playing bears—if they had not known already. 'Fairy tales do not give a child his first idea of bogey. What fairy tales [and playing bears] give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey'.[50] The 'literal bear' is a late claimant to the dramatic part of Bear. I don't mean merely that we learn of bears after we have learnt or dreamt of bogeys: the point is that 'being a bear' is as much an imaginative fiction as 'being bogey'.

'Everything has a sort of atmosphere of what it signifies, which makes it sacred', and the 'naked bear' (as it were) is *less* real than the 'bear fictionalised'.[51] Even *Ursus*, the generic bear of scientific taxonomy, is no more 'objective': that creature there—imagine it—is classified as a member of the genus because taxonomists require it so, and may yet prove an interloper when the rules are changed.

Or do we sometimes manage to 'cut reality at the joints', because we have glimpsed the blueprint?[52] It certainly does not follow that because the world does not 'come to us already sliced up into objects' (the error that Dummett attributes to Mill),[53]

[49] J. Keats, *Letters*, ed. J. Gittings (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1970), pp. 65 ff (19.2.1818).

[50] G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* op. cit., p. 129; see also Bettelheim, op. cit., pp. 65, 133.

[51] G. K. Chesterton, *The Poet and the Lunatics* op. cit., p. 68.

[52] Plato, *Phaedrus* 265e.

[53] M. Dummett, *Frege* (Duckworth: London 1973), p. 179; see C. Norris, *Contest of Faculties* (Methuen: London 1985), p. 53 f.

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there is therefore no right and objective way to carve reality. But if there is, we can hardly escape the suspicion that it is because there is after all, as our forebears thought, one Logos only, that the mind receives. And of course we live with the real possibility of doubt.

Are unicorns less real than bears? 'Hamlet and unicorns, etc., are ontologically independent of any *one person's* experience, but they are nevertheless *dependent* upon the community of experiencing subjects'.[54] They are maintained in the kind of being they have by the ceaseless narrative invention of a human community. Deprived of that breath they dwindle, like gods sunk down to bogeymen. But the same is true of 'ordinary' beasts. Bears, evacuated of their folk-significance, may dwindle, to the sad prisoners of provincial zoos, to 'mere animals' (though these images are really only other, and less civil, myths). But perhaps 'real creatures' have their being 'outside the text',

> and it isn't any use for you to doubt it:
> for [they] will do
> as [they] do do
> and there's no doing anything about it.[55]

We can call things what we please, but the magician's dream of altering reality by playing with words remains a dream. 'We can ravage the ecology, suppress the poor, murder protesters, adulterate the gospel, shake our fists defiantly at God and declare the world a mechanism and human beings machines. But the System of the systems remains the ultimate arbiter, and we can no more secede from its jurisdiction than we can stop breathing air'.[56] Magic and reductive realism are alike in this: they deny authority, and the sacred.

The world we inhabit is far wider than materialists—or deconstructionists—suppose, and it is certainly not easy to insist that the world of particular existents is, for us, more basic, sooner known or more compelling than the world of dragons. Those who say that nothing is real but what 'exists' (as dragons don't) are simply re-affirming their disdain for dream, daydream and fiction, disguising their metaphysical commitment

[54] M. Sacks, *The World We Found* (Duckworth: London 1989), p. 124.
[55] T. S. Eliot, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (Faber: London 1939), p. 21.
[56] W. Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia 1984), p. 115.

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as value- and metaphysic-neutral analysis. 'We' don't take dreams seriously, but others do. The Huron, for example, thought it vital that their dream-experiences be acted out in waking life, lest they take their own route into waking existence.[57] How do we identify the creatures that we dream? Must we not do so by comparison with public entities? Doubtless so: but some of those dream creatures are drawn from common story, rather than what moderns think the only real world. 'Man's perceptions are not bounded by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho' ever so acute) can discover'.[58] Some of those creatures that exist *in intellectu* (not in my personal understanding but in human tradition, 'the Cauldron of Story') are projected outward and rediscovered *in re*. Sometimes those reified imaginings return to haunt us. Unicorns are citizens of no mean city: the human—and maybe more than human—imagination. To wish them real is to wish to give a 'local habitation and a name' to what we know from within, as we may also wish to find ourselves 'one soul' with those we take as friends,[59] not simply to see them from outside. Romantic love and unicorns do go together. Wishing to meet a unicorn 'in the flesh', and wishing to meet a person 'in spirit' as well as flesh, are equal, paradoxical desires.

Some conclude, it seems, that such romanticism must be disavowed. 'Reality' is emptied of its projected spirits, and nothing happens but material motions. Those very motions, of course, cannot be rightly captured in our words; the very projective faculty that is praised or blamed for all our phantasmagoric 'errors' turns out to be a projection.[60] But perhaps we can instead revert to older views. 'We have come from God (said Tolkien), and inevitably the myths woven by us, though they contain error, will also reflect a splintered fragment

[57] A. F. C. Wallace, 'Dreams and the Wishes of the Soul: a type of psychoanalytic theory among the seventeenth century Iroquois': *American Anthropologist* 60. 1958, pp. 234-48; reprinted in J. Middleton, ed., *Magic, Witchcraft and Curing* (Natural History Press: Garden City, New York 1967), pp. 171-190.

[58] W. Blake, 'There is No Natural Religion', 2nd series, I: op. cit., p. 97.

[59] Or else we make them flesh, like the Huron, because we fear what they might make of themselves if we don't forestall them.

[60] A thesis deservedly, and unanswerably, derided by H. Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (Open Court: La Salle 1987) pp. 15 ff.

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of the true light, the eternal truth that is with God'.[61] We are, or can be, almost co-creators of the world we inhabit, both by naming creatures and by inventing stories. The question is, in science and in art, whether our inventions stand the test of time, whether they express a truth or only isolate us in a hall of mirrors. Is there some story, some narrative that is God's story, as our predecessors thought that Adam's language was 'real language', whose words perfectly expressed the natures that God made? 'As the *Word* was formed, so is also the *Thing* in its Form and Property, which is named by the Word'.[62]

So where lies Anselm's God? 'The woman who had lost a coin searched for it by the light of a lantern, but she would never have found it unless she had remembered it'.[63] 'God' is the name we give that Truth which must always have been in 'the vast cloisters' of our memory.[64] Those who attempt to say that It is not, or that It is wholly alien to humankind, say nothing: is their saying meant for Truth, or not? If there is no truth, then that is not true; if we *can* never know a truth, who dare assert we can't? 'If I have never experienced such a thing as green I cannot even say that my nose is not green'![65] Those who equate 'their truth' too readily with Truth are equally astray. 'All ask you whatever they wish to ask, but the answer they receive is not always what they want to hear. The man who serves you best is the one who is less intent on hearing from you what he wills to hear than on shaping his will according to what he hears from you'.[66] That than which nothing more in accord with truth could be—which is to say, the truth—must be, and must—for our souls' sake, and our sanity's—be such as we can cling to. If there is one story only, in the end as there was in the beginning, its author and authority is God.

There have been plenty of people to say or think that 'by some kind of original sin [children] should prefer fairy-tales, but according to some kind of new religion [they] ought to be

[61] Carpenter, op. cit., p. 147.

[62] J. Boehme, *Signatura Rerum* 35.56: cited by R. E. Essick, *William Blake and the Language of Adam* (Clarendon Press: Oxford 1989), p. 49.

[63] Augustine, *Confessions* 10.18: tr., R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin: Harmondsworth 1961), p. 224.

[64] Augustine, op. cit., 10.8: p. 215.

[65] G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* op. cit., p. 23.

[66] Augustine, op. cit., 10.26: p. 231.

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induced to like science'.[67] But unicorns and dragons are not a poor substitute for the real pleasures of horse and dinosaur. In wishing them real, we already feel their forcefulness, the life they have apart from any single human fantasist. 'Wishing them real' is a kind of invention, but what we thereby 'invent' is already to be found in the vast cloisters of our memory. Once we have beheld the centaur and the dragon we may perhaps 'suddenly behold, like the ancient shepherds, sheep, and dogs, and horses—and wolves'.[68] We may even, once again, see Anthropos, the Divine Imagining, the God.[69]

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[67] Tolkien, 'On Fairy Stories': op. cit., p. 66.
[68] Tolkien 'On Fairy Stories': op. cit., p. 51.
[69] See my 'Cupitt and Divine Imagining': *Modern Theology* 5. 1988, pp. 45–59.

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